**OUR CONFRERES - WITNESSES OF THE FAITH**

(125 years of MSF, November 2020 conference)

**INTRODUCTION**

We are in November. A special month for believers in Christ. A month in which the Church remembers all the saints, all those who were exemplary witnesses of God's love, who followed Jesus to the end, some shedding their blood, others dedicating themselves to the poor, others remain closed in convents, others as great missionaries, etc.

But in this month, we also remember all the departed faithful, who have already passed beyond but whom no one has declared a saint. Only God knows, how many of them with their simple, humble life, have gained heaven ...

The Congregation of the Missionaries of the Holy Family, founded 125 years ago by the Venerable Fr Jean Battista Berthier, has had 4,207 members in all these years who at least made their first vows or died as novices (30). Many of them have left, both were still in initial formation and already were as religious with perpetual vows, and as priests. They did it for several reasons. Of these more than 4,000 confreres, there are 1309 who remained in the Congregation until the end and who died as Missionaries of the Holy Family. Today (10.20.2020) in the Congregation we are 764 confreres who have made religious vows.

In this long or perhaps not too long history, if we compare it with other religious congregations or orders, we have had witnesses who remained faithful to the One who called them, to the end.

There are certainly those who have earned heaven with their humble and simple service but full of dedication and love for God and neighbor. They lived their lives as the true friends of Jesus, they gave themselves to the Lord without shedding their blood.

But among our deceased confreres there are also those, even if up to now the Church has not declared them saints, who testified to Jesus to a cruel death, who shed their blood precisely because they were disciples, friends of Jesus Christ.

**OUR BROTHERS, WITNESSES OF JESUS**

We find these confreres in two MSF provinces: Kalimantan (they were the three Dutch who suffered martyrdom in Kalimantan) and Poland.

These three **Dutch**, were killed in **Kalimantan**, because they were priests, because they were missionaries, because they are friends of Jesus:

**Fr. FREDERICUS VAN DER LINDEN MSF**, born in Hilversum in the Netherlands on 05.29.1912, first vows on 8 September 1933 and ordained priest on 07.24.1938. A year after his ordination he went for the missions in Kalimantan and began his missionary work in Balikpapan. His mission, as well as his life itself, did not last long. World War II brought the Japanese to Indonesia, filled with hatred for God and his servants. There is no certainty about the death of Fr. Fredericus, it is thought that he was the first to be killed among these three confreres. Together with other prisoners, he was taken to the military airport in Manggar (now: Sepinggan) and was killed there probably by beheading. This happened in February 1942. After the Second World War, when the situation became calmer, his grave was unfortunately not found, because the city was destroyed by bombing. Fr. Fredericus had only 30 years of life, of which 4 years of priesthood and 9 of religious life.

**Fr. CORNELIS VAN DER HOOGTE MSF**, also born in the Netherlands, in Deventer on 12.31.1906, made his first vows with Fr. Fredericus and were ordained priests on the same day. These two departed for Borneo-Kalimantan for missions. Fr. Cornelis, however, initially worked in Banjarmasin, then in Balikpapan. Later, together with two other confreres in February 1942 he was arrested by the Japanese and on February 20, 1942 with a group of 80 other Dutchmen he was killed on the beach of Balikpapan. They were killed with a cruel death, tied two by two, thrown into the sea and killed by the soldiers who shot them from the beach. Fr. Cornelis had completed 36 years of life.

The third Dutch confrere is **Fr. ADAMUS JANMAAT MSF** , born in Wilnis on 07.22.1899, made his first vows on 8 September 1929, ordained a priest on 07.29.1934. He was the greatest in age and religious life among these confreres. At the end of 1935 he was sent to Kalimantan and started to work in Banjarmasin, later he was appointed pastor in a new parish in this city. He was also the secretary of the Apostolic Prefect of Banjarmasin, Msgr. J. Kusters. Then, on August 2, 1940, he became parish priest in Balikpapan. It was there that he was captured by the Japanese and suffered the same death as P. Cornelis, thrown into the sea and shot to death by Japanese soldiers.

At the time of high sea, the victims of the massacre returned to shore. With the help of several residents from Flores, the bodies of the two priests Fr. Cornelis and Fr. Adamus were taken from the beach and were buried. At first, the attempt to bury them separately from the others was rejected by the Japanese army, but in the end, they gave permission, and both were buried under a coconut tree, marked with a cross. In 1945, when the Allied troops attacked and captured the city from the hands of the Japanese, the entire city was destroyed. There is nothing that was left intact. The coconut trees were also destroyed by fire and so the graves of none of the three missionaries can be found anymore.

Another group of confreres killed in the Second World War are those of **the Polish Province**.

A large number of the Polish confreres were locked by the German soldiers already in the first days of September in the Sanctuary of Górka Klasztorna. There were **30 of which 5 were priests** **with the Provincial Superior PIOTR ZAWADA** MSF **and 25 religious brothers, postulants and candidates** to the religious life. The first victim in Górka Klasztorna was brother Bernard MSF, Franciszek Jabłoński, who suffered a cruel fate just because he helped a woman who worked in the camp. This was forbidden. The guardian Bromber, impatient to wait for the extermination of the religious, for this gesture of Br. Bernard, hanged him personally on a tree, in the forest along the road to Złotów. In Górka Klasztorna other priests from the surrounding parishes have been imprisoned. In total, on November 9, 1939 together with the MSF confreres there were 54 priests detained in the Górka Klasztorna camp.

It was Saturday from 11 to 12 November 1939. At two in the morning a truck entered the courtyard of the convent and began the evacuation of the prisoners. One of them, Fr. Bolesław Wysocki MSF, editor of the “Messenger of the Holy Family”, was trying to escape. They shot them and threw his dead body on the truck among the others. All were taken to a wood in Paterek and shot and buried in a mass grave there. In short, they were 30 MSF and 40 other people. After the war, the exhumation took place. The body of Fr. Piotr Zawada MSF - Provincial of the time was undoubtedly recognized. The leader of the firing squad, Harry Schultz, was captured after the war and it was he himself who told about how things went ... Our confreres killed in Paterek were aged between 17 and 52, the vast majority not had turned 32.

Besides these 30 confreres of Górka Klasztorna, killed in a single night, there were still others, who sacrificed their lives during the Second World War, remaining faithful to God and their vocation to the point of giving their lives.

Among them is a scholastic - **BRUNON PRUDEL** **MSF** (32 years old), a student of the major seminary in Kazimierz Biskupi. At the proposal of the superior to go to his parents' house, he replied: *this is my house, I am staying here with you*. He was arrested by German soldiers and ended up in an Austrian concentration camp in Mauthausen. There he was treated worse than the others, only because a cleric, a religious. There he died exhausted and exhausted on 7 July 1941.

Then there are still two other priests:

**Fr. MIECZYSLAW SKOBLEWSKI MSF**, was killed at the age of 32 with a baton by the head of the Bertold block on April 16, 1940 in front of the entire flock of the Oranienburg concentration camp in Germany. After the war of his cruel death, the two priests imprisoned with him but survived the war, gave testimony.

**Fr. STANISLAW DOTKA** **MSF**, at the age of 27, was arrested and taken to the concentration camp at Mauthausen in Austria and later to Dachau (in short, 12 MSF priests were imprisoned in this concentration camp). He could avoid arrest simply by ceasing to wear the cassock and celebrate masses. He did not. He said: I *'m a priest, that's where my place is*. He died in Dachau on 01.13.1941 at the age of 27, just one year after his priestly ordination. His body was taken to his hometown and was buried in the parish church.

The memory of these our confreres killed in hatred of the faith is alive among the Polish confreres. The Polish Province approached the Polish Episcopal Conference in 2007 asking for the *nulla osta* to be able to begin the beatification process. In response came the news:

“The 341 Plenary Meeting of the Polish Bishops' Conference, which was held in Warsaw on October 2-3, 2007, expressed the *nulla osta* on the beginning of the process of beatification and canonization of Fr. Stanisław Dotka MSF, Fr. Mieczysław Skoblewski MSF, cleric Bruno Prudel MSF and thirty religious (5 priests, 25 religious brothers) of the Congregation of the Missionaries of the Holy Family”.

Documents - the biographies of the candidates were prepared and also translated into Italian and was sent to the diocese of Bielsko-Żywiec, where the collective process of the Third Group of Martyrs of the Second World War was to begin. But so far, the process hasn't started ...

Finally, we must remember another confrere who is already a **Servant of God, Fr. EDMUND KAŁAS MSF**, born on February 15, 1899 in Wierzchucin Królewski in Poland. He made his first vows on September 8, 1927 in Górka Klasztorna. He was ordained a priest on June 13, 1932 in Poznań by Cardinal August Hlond, Primate of Poland. He held the position of prefect and professor in the minor seminary, and then also the novitiate master. A year before the war he left for France, where he carried out pastoral duties in the local centers of the Polish diaspora. During the war he was arrested by the Gestapo (it was the secret police of Nazi Germany) in Rosieres and imprisoned in Mauthausen. He died a martyr in defense of the faith, massacred because the Nazis asked him to get on his knees and say, in front of all the other prisoners in the concentration camp, that Hitler is god! He did not and was beaten for a long time until he lost consciousness. They took him to the hospital but he didn't make it. He died and was cremated on 7 June 1943 (prisoner number 28187). In March 2002, he was joined with 121 other martyrs of World War II. The process was concluded in the diocesan level of the Archdiocese of Gniezno on May 28, 2009, and on May 24, 2011 in Pelplin the process of beatification of the Second Group of Martyrs of the Second World War was solemnly closed at the diocesan level and all documents are were presented to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints in Rome.

**CONCLUSION**

We thank God we live a life and carry out our service in peacetime, even though the world has now been hit by the pandemic. Some work in difficult missions, others in parishes, others play the very important role of formators. It is here that we give our witness every day by following the Holy Family of Nazareth, the model of our life. We have good examples, great witnesses of God's love. We have our Founder, the Venerable Father Jean Battista Berthier who left us an example of a tireless missionary, of a true friend of Jesus. We have these confreres of ours who have testified Jesus Christ until the shedding of blood. We too are called by Jesus , his friends. We pray to the Lord that he will give us all great strength to be courageous and dedicated missionaries and witnesses. ... *never a murmur, never a complaint, never distrust or despair. Always trust, peace, love of God's will, the acceptance of all the crosses that his hand distributes* (P. Jean B. Berthier).

P. Bogdan Mikutra MSF